An Interview with Marion Halligan

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Marion Halligan has won awards for her novels, essays and short stories. She has published fifteen books including, most recently, the novels The Fog Garden *and* The Point. *Born and raised in the New South Wales industrial coastal city of Newcastle, she moved to the inland national capital, Canberra, in the 1960s. Her first book was published in 1987.*

While reading The Point, *I was strongly reminded of the best work of the great British novelist Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) in many details, but also in the intellectual scope and generous spirit of the novel. I therefore began my interview by asking Halligan about her interest in Murdoch and her influence on* The Point *in particular.*

Adapted from an interview recorded at Radio Adelaide, 9th May 2003.

Gillian Dooley: It seems to me that The Point is full of allusions to Iris Murdoch's novels. I was reminded especially of Henry and Cato and The Black Prince — Iris Murdoch at her peak. What is your reaction to that?

Marion Halligan: I am rather overcome, really. I'm not conscious of much direct connection. I have been on a reading jag of Iris Murdoch recently. I'd read books of hers over the years, but not a lot and not recently before writing The Point. I think it's a case of . . . maybe synchronicity. I did know that Iris was interested in the nature of Good, the notion of what is good and how you behave well and that kind of thing, and I suppose I'm interested in those things too. It seems to me that novels are very much about this question of how shall we live, not answering it but asking it, and what novelists do is look at people who live different sorts of lives, and often people who live rather badly are a good way of asking the question.

But there's also a similar feeling of connection with the great mainstream of European culture, the classical, the mediaeval church and all those rich sources of cultural inspiration which your characters, especially Jerome, and Clovis of course, are very aware of.

Of course, when I went to school and university, way back last century some time, one still studied English. From Anglo-Saxon, Beowulf, through Chaucer and everything up to the present including American literature—though not Australian. I didn't actually do much in the way of classics, I mean Greek and Latin, at all, but I studied art which gave me a great theoretical knowledge of things like the Renaissance as well.

Yes, Iris Murdoch might have been an art historian if she'd had another life.

Well exactly, I think that's a very interesting thing, and it's certainly something that I feel I've got in common with her, an interest in art. I notice some writers, like Jolley and Garner, take images from music, but I get mine a lot from art, painting especially. And it's kind of natural for me to think in terms of the past. I had a Methodist upbringing, too, in the sense that I went to the Methodist church and Sunday school and that focuses so much on the Bible, and it's very natural for me to think in these terms … all this stuff's in my head and I think maybe it's more difficult for people these days because they don't have that classical kind of English literature and Bible training.

It's not an old-fashioned book, though. It also looks to the future. Jerome has this wonderful Faustian idea of capturing all the world's knowledge in his computer: he's a very sophisticated computer expert as well as being classically trained.

Well that's right. Computers are a kind of instrument of fate in a way. They bring about a lot of the damage in the book, they are useful but sinister. I find this book interesting, because it's got more plot than most of my books have, in the sense that I don't want to give away what happens. Mostly when I write books it doesn't matter if you know what's going to happen, but in this one I do want it to be a terrible shock.

There's that reference to Elinor dying to get back to read her Iris Murdoch novel, which I thought was confirmation of my suspicions. That's not always the reaction one has with contemporary novels, though. I felt like that about The Point. I didn't want to put it down. I think that sometimes readability seems a bit disreputable amongst critics.

Yes, it's strange, isn't it, that.

You don't obviously feel that, thank goodness.

I don't feel that, and in fact when I was reading Murdoch's Henry and Cato just recently I thought, I'll just give up ordinary life, I've got to finish this book, this is terribly important, I'm a novelist, this is a field study I'm doing here, I won't feel guilty about neglecting everything to read it. And that seems to me to be a sign of a good book, that you want to read it, and this desire it gives you to remain immersed in it doesn't make it less difficult or less interesting and certainly not less significant. I reckon Murdoch would agree.

You don't patronise your readers at all. You explain but you don't labour it. You explain those historical things.

Everything's there that you need to know to read it, really. If there's something a bit difficult, I will explain it for you. I wouldn't expect people to know foreign languages, for instance, I would always put a translation in, and where I do do something like the strange email about the penguin which precedes the message that makes the whole thing crash, the notion of the penguin ripping its breast open and feeding its young, I put all of that in for you, because I think those narratives are just so interesting, the world's full of interesting stories that you don't want to lose track of. I want my readers to be stimulated. Occasionally I'll use words that they don't know. I'm always reading books full of words I don't know, and if I'm flat on my back in bed I think, I don't know what that word means, so what, and maybe I'll look at it tomorrow but maybe I won't, but if I'm sitting up sort of seriously I might go and get a dictionary.

Books are there to expand your knowledge, not just to tell you what you already know.

Yes. I love reading really escapist books from time to time, exciting murder mysteries. I don't like thrillers much, but murder mysteries I do like, and I'll kind of gallop through those, but I think that when you are talking about a literary novel, which is a different kind of thing, you do want to make people think. That's why people read them. You want people to think, how does this apply to me? What is this saying about the world we live in? This question of 'how shall we live': Jerome of course is concerned with it. Clovis is particularly concerned with it, and he doesn't have any books or anything, because he's a vagrant. He has to walk around the lake and make do with what's already in his head, which is pretty muddled. He gets things wrong. And Gwyneth, the teenage drug addict and innocent, is trying to work things out. And then you've got the boys with wicked hearts who are doing dreadful things and then somebody like Oscar who is a lovely boy, but who, as a lot of young people do, is creating his own religion, and this I find quite terrifying, that so many young people think they can invent their own spiritual version of the world. And that's what Oscar's doing. He and his clever friends 'nitrous out', or 'bulb out' is another word for it … nitrous oxide, that gives them a high and they think they understand the whole world. That they are having visions of meaning.

One thing I was really struck by was the way you used the lake, Lake Burley Griffin. It was almost another character — the lake and the sky. You described the scene as 'cool and severe and beautiful'. I thought that was really lovely.

I came to Canberra just as the lake was being built, which is a funny thing to do with a lake, the bed of the stream was being flattened out and people were making walls. This interests me a lot about Canberra, that you sit down and you think about it and you create it like that. And the number of people who live in Canberra who have said to me, 'I look at the lake quite differently now, that you've written about it, I can't go over it without thinking of the words you've used,' and this makes me really happy, that they are seeing with my eyes. I've been watching the lake for years, because it's difficult to go very many places in Canberra without crossing it or driving round it or something, and it's my habit to keep trying to find words for the things I see.

And especially in the winter months, the colours of Canberra are so beautiful, and I really felt that coming through, it was a presence in the novel.

I actually have this notion that what you're doing in novels is you're giving people a whole lot of concrete things to hang on to. You're giving them lakes and trees and food and maybe buildings and all this kind of thing, and you've got to give them a really good sense of those things. It's got to be a presence that they've got in their heads that they can imagine and see, and then when you've done that you can come in with the ideas and abstract things, the unconcrete things, the emotions, and people will trust you because you made them believe in this concrete world. They'll trust you that the emotions and so on will be right too.

I think that's something Iris Murdoch was very good at. But she has some negative lessons, too, don't you think?

Yes . . .

Perhaps the very long philosophical conversations. Perhaps the madness of the plots sometimes.

I wouldn't dare do her long philosophical conversations. I mean I have a couple of pages of one-sentence exchanges about the world, and some reviewer took me to task for losing her, and I thought, well, she was fairly easily lost! She should try reading some of Iris Murdoch's pages and pages on whether God exists and all that kind of thing. We live in slightly different times, I think. And the plots are mad — but I envy that, I sit back and wonder at her plots.

Another thing is that the small Australian city, I'm thinking also of Newcastle, is often a feature in your novels. Is that just an accident? Is it just because that's where you know, or have you sought to live there?

It's just accident. I was born in Newcastle and came to Canberra as a student. I've never really lived in Sydney. I've spent the odd few days there, but I've never actually even spent as long as a say fortnight in Sydney, which is interesting when you think of it; once I longed to live in the great metropolis. I quite like going there, but about three days I think is enough, and then I want to come home.

Often the Australian novel is set either in Sydney or Melbourne, or right in the outback, and the regional cities don't get a look-in, so it's quite refreshing.

They're very interesting places, with their own dynamic. I left Newcastle and came to Canberra when I was twenty-one or twenty-two, I think. And I used to go back quite a lot and I suddenly realised it was a place full of amazing sto-

ries, and I was interested in writing those. But I seem to have got through Newcastle now, and my subject now is Canberra, because that's where I live and that's where interesting things happen. It's always had such a bad press. The Duke of Edinburgh, with his 'city without a soul', which was a terrible thing to say. It's just full of ordinary people doing their best to live their ordinary lives. A lot of poverty, a lot of unemployment.

Yes, that has increased since I left.

A lot of drug addiction and so on. All of those things do exist.

So the homeless man is plausible? I don't think when I lived in Canberra twenty-five years ago that would have been plausible, but I'm sure you're right.

It is plausible now. There is huge proportion apparently of homeless children who live under bridges and things, who've run away from home, in a lot of cases for good reasons.

Such a cold place to live under a bridge!

It's a terrible place to be poor, because it's so expensive to keep warm in winter. You live in the north, Queensland for instance, it's not too bad, you can put on woollies and it's warm enough in the winter, but in Canberra there are a lot of families who live in poverty. There are a lot of families who live in cars. They can't get accommodation. There's a really dangerous sort of underbelly to Canberra that people don't see. I wanted to put my homeless people right there in the Parliamentary Triangle, because I was very interested in the contrast between people who possess an enormous amount, and maybe are possessed by their obsessions in various ways, and the dispossessed.

And then there's a sort of equalisation in a way, with Jerome and Clovis sort of coming together.

Yes.

A lot of the novel is written in Jerome's voice, so you're being a sort of male impersonator. Was that difficult? What sort of adjustments did you need to make?

Well, I have the sense that as a novelist what you do is you put your brain into a kind of gear, which is the Jerome gear, and after that you can do his voice, and of course it owes a lot to my voice, it's a version of mine. But he's a bit more pompous than I am. His vocabulary is more Latinate. That was great fun to do, this rather more polysyllabic utterance than I usually allow myself.

I got very fond of Jerome.

I'm fond of Jerome. I like him a lot. He's such a kind and good man, and he's trying so hard, and I suppose he's a bit of a tribute in a way to all the men of my generation, but also a generation or two back, who had a go at becoming 'religious'. A number of them were Jesuits. A great many people, when you think of Thomas Keneally or Hanrahan in Melbourne, Gerard Windsor, they all tried this path of going through the priesthood or some sort of religious life, and stopped, and I was very interested in the kind of man who does that. Because Jerome is a very sensitive sort of man. I don't know that I could have got very easily into the head of some sort of very ocker -ish person. But the man who wanted to be a priest, or a monk, he is such a common phenomenon, I have discovered that everybody knows somebody, and a lot of men who've talked to me about the book turn out to have tried it themselves. And a thing about this is the way the church failed them. Couldn't give them what they sought, or expected.

It's nice to have an acknowledgement that there are Australian men like that. They're not all Paul Hogans. Just a last question: the title, The Point. You could see it as fairly straightforward, as the name of the restaurant, but did you intend a double meaning?

I'm not sure. I was worried when I started talking about it, because I realised one kept making terrible puns, like saying, 'you get the point', or 'the point is … ' A lot of my novels like Spider Cup and Lovers' Knots and The Golden Dress have rather sort of luscious titles, rather glamorous titles. And The Fog Garden I think is a lovely title. And I think I wanted to have this rather sharp, bare kind of thing, and I realised that there were going to be these sort of double meanings. I try to avoid them. I don't like the sense of absurd puns, but there is of course a significance in the meaning and the sound.

But there's a sort of exploration of the 'point' of life, if there is one?

I think so. And the fact is of course, that this is a man-made point, too, this little promontory has been created and it doesn't exist at all in Canberra. That part of the lake is totally straight, almost a ruled line. So I wanted this idea of people being able to imagine it being in some quite other way. Because I do think that imagination in life is very important, and I think a lot of the way we behave, say, towards refugees or to poor people or whatever, is because we really fail to imagine. And that's a terrible failing, I think.

GILLIAN DOOLEY is a literary critic and librarian living in Adelaide, South Australia. Her publications include From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch *(2003) as compiler and editor;* Alas, for the Pelicans! Flinders, Baudin and Beyond: Essays and Poems *(2002) as contributing co-editor; and essays, articles and book reviews in Australian and overseas magazines, books and journals. She is currently writing a book on V.S. Naipaul for University of South Carolina Press, and editing the journal of the explorer and navigator Matthew Flinders.*